

## Hospitality, Truman Capote

### Hospitality

ONCE UPON A TIME, IN the rural South, there were farmhouses and farm wives who set tables where almost any passing stranger, a traveling preacher, a knife-grinder, an itinerant worker, was welcome to sit down to a hearty midday meal. Probably many such farm wives still exist. Certainly my aunt does, Mrs. Jennings Carter. Mary Ida Carter.

As a child I lived for long periods of time on the Carters' farm, small then, but today a considerable property. The house was lighted by oil lamps in those days; water was pumped from a well and carried, and the only warmth was provided by fireplaces and stoves, and the only entertainment was what we ourselves manufactured. In the evenings, after supper, likely as not my uncle Jennings, a handsome, virile man, would play the piano accompanied by his pretty wife, my mother's younger sister.

They were hard-working people, the Carters. Jennings, with the help of a few sharecropping field hands, cultivated his land with a horse-drawn plow. As for his wife, her chores were unlimited. I helped her with many of them: feeding the pigs, milking the cows, churning milk into butter, husking corn, shelling peas and pecans—it was fun, except for one assignment I sought to avoid, and when forced to perform, did so with my eyes shut: I just plain hated wringing the necks of chickens, though I certainly didn't object to eating them afterward. This was during the Depression, but there was plenty to eat on Mary Ida's table for the principal meal of the day, which was served at noon and to which her sweating husband and his helpers were summoned by clanging a big bell. I loved to ring the bell; it made me feel powerful and beneficent.

It was to these midday meals, where the table was covered with hot biscuits and cornbread and honey-in-the-comb and chicken and catfish or fried squirrel and butter beans and black-eyed peas, that guests sometimes appeared, sometimes expected, sometimes not. "Well," Mary Ida would sigh, seeing a footsore Bible salesman approaching along the road, "we don't need another Bible. But I guess we'd better set another place."

Of all those we fed, there were three who will never slip my memory. First, the Presbyterian missionary, who was traveling around the countryside soliciting funds for his Christian duties in unholy lands. Mary Ida said she couldn't afford a cash contribution, but she would be pleased to have him take dinner with us. Poor man, he definitely looked as though he needed one. Arrayed in a rusty, dusty, shiny black suit, creaky black undertaker shoes, and a black-greenish hat, he was thin as a stalk of sugar cane. He had a long red wrinkled neck with a bobbing Adam's apple the size of a goiter.

I never saw a greedier fellow; he sucked up a quart of buttermilk in three swallows, devoured a whole platter of chicken single-handed (or rather, double-handedly, for he was eating with both hands), and so many biscuits, dripping with butter and molasses, that I lost count. However, for all his gobbling, he managed to give us hair-raising accounts of his exploits in perilous territories. "I'll tell you somethin'. I've seen cannibals roast black men and white men on a spit—just like you'd roast a pig—and eat every morsel, toes, brains, ears, and all.

One of them cannibals told me the best eatin' is a roasted newborn baby; said it tasted just like lamb. I spec the reason they didn't eat me is 'cause I didn't have enough meat on my bones. I've seen men hung by their heels till blood gushed out their ears. Once I got bit by a green mamba, the deadliest snake in the world. I was kinda nauseated there for a spell, but I didn't die, so the black men figured I was a god and they gave me a coat made of leopard skins."

After the gluttonous preacher had departed, Mary Ida felt dizzy; she was sure she would have bad dreams for a month. But her husband, comforting her, said: "Oh, honey, you didn't believe any of that malarkey? That man's no more a missionary than I am. He's just a heathen liar."

Then there was the time we entertained a convict who had escaped from a chain gang at the Alabama State Prison in Atmore. Obviously, we didn't know he was a dangerous character serving a life sentence for umpteen armed robberies. He simply appeared at our door and told Mary Ida he was hungry and could she give him something to eat. "Well, sir," she said, "you've come to the right place. I'm just putting dinner on the table now."

Somehow, probably by raiding a washline, he had exchanged his convict stripes for overalls and a worn blue work shirt. I thought he was nice, we all did; he had a flower tattooed on his wrist, his eyes were gentle, he was gently spoken. He said his name was Bancroft (which, as it turned out, was his true name). My uncle Jennings asked him: "What's your line of work, Mr. Bancroft?"

"Well," he drawled, "I'm just lookin' for some. Like most everybody else. I'm pretty handy. Can do most anythin'. You wouldn't have somethin' for me?"

Jennings said: "I sure could use a man. But I can't afford him."

"I'd work for most nothin'."

"Yeah," said Jennings. "But nothing is what I've got."

Unpredictably, for it was a subject seldom alluded to in that household, crime came into the conversation. Mary Ida complained: "Pretty Boy Floyd. And that Dillinger man. Running around the country shooting people. Robbing banks."

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Bancroft. "I got no sympathy with them banks. And Dillinger, he's real smart, you got to hand him that. It kinda makes me laugh the way he knocks off them banks and gets clean away with it." Then he actually laughed, displaying tobacco-tinted teeth.

"Well," Mary Ida countered, "I'm slightly surprised to hear you say that, Mr. Bancroft."

Two days later Jennings drove his wagon into town and returned with a keg of nails, a sack of flour, and a copy of the Mobile Register. On the front page was a picture of Mr. Bancroft—"Two-Barrels" Bancroft, as he was colloquially known to the authorities. He had been captured in Evergreen, thirty miles away. When Mary Ida saw his photo, she rapidly fanned her face with a paper fan, as though to prevent a fainting fit. "Heaven help me," she cried. "He could have killed us all." Jennings said sourly: "There was a reward. And we missed out on it. That's what gets my goat."

Next, there was a girl called Zilla Ryland. Mary Ida discovered her bathing a two-year-old baby, a red-haired boy, in a creek that ran through the woods back of the house. As Mary Ida described it: "I saw her before she saw me. She was standing naked in the water bathing this

beautiful little boy. On the bank there was a calico dress and the child's clothes and an old suitcase tied together with a piece of rope.

The boy was laughing, and so was she. Then she saw me, and she was startled. Scared. I said: 'Nice day. But hot. The water must feel good.' But she snatched up the baby and scampered out of the creek, and I said: 'You don't have to be frightened of me. I'm only Mrs. Carter that lives just over yonder. Come on up and rest a spell.' Then she commenced to cry; she was only a little thing, no more than a child herself. I asked what's the matter, honey? But she wouldn't answer. By now she had pulled on her dress and dressed the boy. I said maybe I could help you if you'd tell me what's wrong. But she shook her head, and said there was nothing wrong, and I said well, we don't cry over nothing, do we? Now you just follow me up to the house and we'll talk about it. And she did."

Indeed she did.

I was swinging in the porch swing reading an old Saturday Evening Post when I noticed them coming up the path, Mary Ida toting a broken-down suitcase and this barefooted girl carrying a child in her arms. Mary Ida introduced me: "This is my nephew, Buddy. And—I'm sorry, honey, I didn't catch your name."  
"Zilla," the girl whispered, eyes lowered.  
"I'm sorry, honey. I can't hear you."  
"Zilla," she again whispered.  
"Well," said Mary Ida cheerfully, "that sure is an unusual name."  
Zilla shrugged. "My mama give it to me. Was her name, too."

Two weeks later Zilla was still with us; she proved to be as unusual as her name. Her parents were dead, her husband had "run off with another woman. She was real fat, and he liked fat women, he said I was too skinny, so he run off with her and got a divorce and married her up in Athens, Georgia." Her only living kin was a brother: Jim James. "That's why I come down here to Alabama. The last I heard, he was located somewhere around here."

Uncle Jennings did everything in his power to trace Jim James. He had good reason, for, although he liked Zilla's little boy, Jed, he'd come to feel quite hostile toward Zilla—her thin voice aggravated him, and her habit of humming mysterious tuneless melodies.

Jennings to Mary Ida: "Just the hell how much longer is our boarder going to hang around?" Mary Ida: "Oh, Jennings. Shhh! Zilla might hear you. Poor soul. She's got nowhere to go." So Jennings intensified his labors. He brought the sheriff into the case; he even paid to place an ad in the local paper—and that was really going far. But nobody hereabouts had ever heard of Jim James.

At last Mary Ida, clever woman, had an idea. The idea was to invite a neighbor, Eldridge Smith, to evening supper, usually a light meal served at six. I don't know why she hadn't thought of it before. Mr. Smith was not much to look at, but he was a recently widowed farmer of about forty with two school-aged children.

After that first supper Mr. Smith got to stopping by almost every twilight. After dark we all left Zilla and Mr. Smith alone, where they swung together on the creaking porch swing and laughed and talked and whispered. It was driving Jennings out of his mind because he didn't like Mr. Smith any better than he liked Zilla; his wife's repeated requests to "Hush, honey. Wait and see" did little to soothe him.

We waited a month. Until finally one night Jennings took Mr. Smith aside and said: "Now look here, Eldridge. Man to man, what are your intentions toward this fine young lady?" The way Jennings said it, it was more like a threat than anything else.

Mary Ida made the wedding dress on her foot-pedaled Singer sewing machine. It was white cotton with puffed sleeves, and Zilla wore a white silk ribbon bow in her hair, especially curled for the occasion. She looked surprisingly pretty. The ceremony was held under the shade of a mulberry tree on a cool September afternoon, the Reverend Mr. L. B. Persons presiding. Afterward everybody was served cupcakes and fruit punch spiked with scuppernong wine. As the newlyweds rode away in Mr. Smith's mule-drawn wagon, Mary Ida lifted the hem of her skirt to dab at her eyes, but Jennings, eyes dry as a snake's skin, declared: "Thank you, dear Lord. And while You're doing favors, my crops could use some rain."

The End